

JACK

A

MENDICANT

BY

C. L. PIRKIS



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BY

C. L. PIRKIS

Author of "Lady Lovelace," etc.

Illustrations by E. STUART HARDY

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*The proceeds from the sale of this story will be given to the
National Canine Defence League, 151, Strand, London.*

Mrs. Sarah K. Bolton
June 13, 1901.

TO DEAREST

MISS MARSTON,

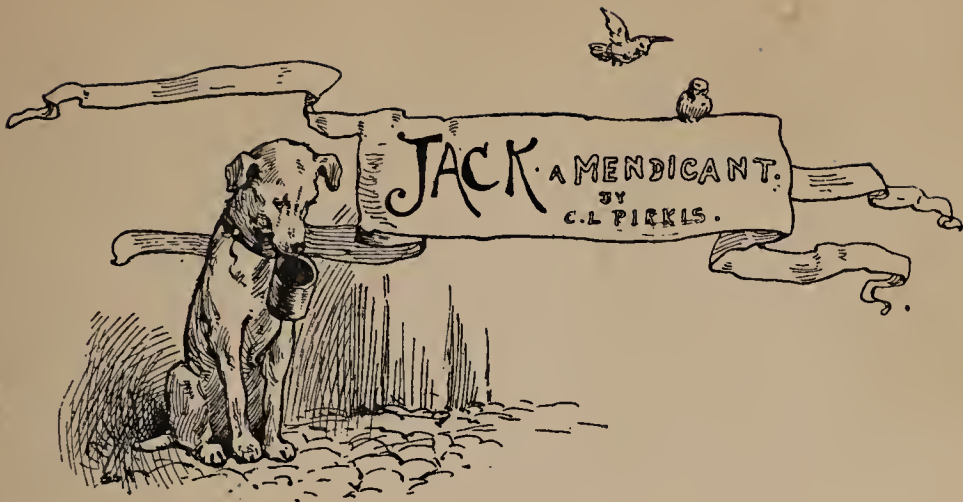
MY FRIEND OF LONG YEARS,

IN LOVE AND IN REVERENCE

I Dedicate this little Book.

C. L. PIRKIS.

NUTFIELD, 1901.



A WHITE-HAIRED mongrel terrier it was, with flopping ears, and only half a tail—a thin, shadowy sort of thing that used to grub about in the twilight in the gutters, and in odd corners where poor people throw waste and rubbish, picking up its own living as best it could. If it had not known how to “fend for itself,” it must have fared hardly indeed ; for though it had a master who loved it, as he would have loved the sun in the heavens could his blind eyes have been lightened for one moment by its beams, and who treasured it as he did the memory of his dead wife, dead daughter, dead grandchild, yet he had nothing but his love to give it, and love, as we all know, though it never faileth, and is greater than faith and hope, in hard times cannot so much as buy an ounce of bread, nor even get a bone for a dog.

Caleb had been blind for more than twenty years. Once he had been a strong skilful workman, who had never known a dinnerless table nor a fireless hearth. Things had gone well with him in early life; he had married a stout young country woman, and had had one child by her—a blue-eyed, fair-haired darling, whom they had christened Martha, but whom everyone loved to call Mattie. She looked as if she had been born to a pet-name, and she stuck to it as a right. Mattie was sent to school and taught embroideries and needlework; she was not to work hard, as her father and mother had done before her, but was to lead the quiet, gentle sort of life God so evidently intended her for; and if, by-and-by, when father and mother were getting old and could no longer work for their darling, some good honest workman were to come along and offer to marry her—well!—then he should have her, and God's blessing go with her.

But before Mattie was ten years old, or there was any thought of father and mother getting old, Caleb's great trouble had come upon him. There was a huge fire at the factory where he worked, and Caleb, in his zeal to save his master's property, was much burnt about his

face, arms, and chest. They took him to the hospital, where they did the best they could for him, and he came out of it in a month's time with limbs patched, face sound though scarred, but eyesight gone for ever.

How the stout strong wife would have wept over him if she had had time to weep! But time meant money in those days, and she set to work with a will to get the daily bread. No more embroideries for little Mattie : sewing and stitching will serve her in better stead now, for she can earn a shilling here and a shilling there by plain needlework among her poor neighbours.

And so things went on for ten years or more. Caleb turned woman in the house, and cooked their small meals, and kept things as straight and neat as he could without his eyesight; and the women turned men, as poor women often have to do, and brought in the pounds and the shillings, or, failing the pounds, the shillings and the pennies, and even in those days had always wherewithal to help a brother or a sister less fortunate than themselves.

Then there came another change: fever set in in their neighbourhood, and the brave strong mother was the first to fall a victim to it.

Caleb was dazed with grief. Mattie wept her heart out, then set to work again, but this time with less of spirit and courage. From house to house Caleb groped his way, begging for work—he would do what he could for a sixpence a day; he was, so he said, “a giant in strength.” “True,” said the people; “but a blind giant is of no use to us, and we are too poor to pay sixpence a day for nothing.”

“I will go into the workhouse,” said Caleb; “no man shall say I live idle upon my little girl’s earnings.”

Then Mattie clung about his knees and besought him not to leave her, telling him a secret she had meant to tell the dead mother, how that she had married secretly a fine-looking young fellow who had made love to her, how that where he had gone she knew not, nor even whether the name in which he had married her were his own.

Caleb lifted up his voice and cursed the day wherein he had lost his eyesight. “If I had but the glimmer of daylight wherewith to guide my steps, I would search the world through to find the false-hearted coward who has brought this shame to our door. Lord, Thou hast dealt

hardly with me indeed!" he said, with his sightless eye-balls lifted heavenwards.

Mattie drooped day by day, but still she managed to keep her customers together, and sent home smart dresses for gay young shop-girls to wear in the summer evenings when they went walking out with their sweethearts. By-and-by a second Mattie came—a little fair-haired, blue-eyed thing, like Mattie the first; and though Caleb cursed again the false-hearted man who had left his Mattie to struggle through her troubles alone, the little creature came like a gleam of sunshine into his dark life, and no one thought more of her baby comforts, or took more tender care of the tiny fragile thing, than the old blind grandfather.

For Caleb was fast becoming a prematurely old man now. He lacked the first of youth's greatest preservers—honest, steady, constant work; and he lacked also the second—good, plain, wholesome food. What wonder if his back were bent, his brow wrinkled, and his hair thin and grey!

How they managed to struggle through another five years he did not know, no one quite knew. The furniture in their little room (they had only one room now) grew less and less; also their

bread was often eaten without butter ; also, when the winter came round, Mattie began to have a cough and complain of a pain at her chest. Then Caleb whispered something in little Mattie's ear, and the child led him down the stairs and along the streets to a bright sunshiny wall in the big city, where people were passing backwards and forwards all day long, and where, if the old blind man held out his hat, there might be a chance of finding a few stray pence in it at the end of the day.

The poor people in the house where they lived felt their hearts touched when they saw the old man and the small white child creeping down the stairs together, and heard the poor suffering daughter coughing as she stooped over her dresses and shirts. They shook their heads at each other : " It can't go on much longer," said one to the other ; " and what they'll do without her, God only knows." So they would give little Mattie a cup of tea or a bit of cheese to take to her mother, and the mother would drink the tea, and give the cheese to the little one, and smile and shake her head, and say she couldn't eat.

And one day a small rough boy in the house brought to little Mattie a white terrier pup.



“Yet I live on,” said Caleb, as day after day he took his stand by the sunshiny wall, Mattie by his side and Jack on his haunches a little in front.

“Father was going to drown it,” he said, “but I told him I thought you would like it, and maybe by-and-by ’twill help to lead the old man along.” Little Mattie took the puppy gratefully, and called him Jack, after her boy friend. They knotted a piece of cord together and put it round Jack’s neck, and every day the old man, the child, and the terrier pup were to be seen finding their way along the streets to the bright sunshiny wall.

Once, as they stood thus in the bleak March weather, with a north-east wind sweeping the streets and drifting the dust into clouds that shut out the spring sunbeams, a poor woman came hurriedly up to them. “You’d best make haste home, Caleb,” she said, “if you want to see your daughter again alive.” She forgot, poor soul, for the moment, that Caleb hadn’t seen his daughter for ten years or more, and never could—in this life, at any rate—see her again. But poor people, you know, haven’t much time to spend in choosing their words, and they don’t expect other people to be very nice in the matter either.

So Mattie and Jack and the grandfather trudged through the streets, and for once in a

way got home by daylight, to find Mattie the elder (poor child, she wasn't five-and-twenty then) lying on the bed, the sheet stained with blood, and her feet and hands growing damp and cold.

“She's goin' fast,” said one of the women about the bedside.

“O God,” cried Caleb, kneeling down on the bare boards, “if only for one moment I might see those blue eyes before they close for ever!” Useless the prayer, the beating of the hands against the closed barred doors: Mattie's life ebbed out that day before the twilight fell, and—well—two days after, there was another mound in the big pauper burial place outside the city. That was all.

“Yet I live on,” said Caleb, as day after day he took his stand by the sunshiny wall, Mattie by his side and Jack on his haunches a little in front. Mattie's clothes were very thin now, and her shoes almost dropping from her feet. One by one the little odd comforts the dead mother had bought her were taken to the pawnshop, and a few coppers, or at most a sixpence, brought back in return. As winter crept on, she began to grow white and shiver as the mother had

done, and then cough and draw her breath in as though to let it out gave her pain. The neighbours began to shake their heads again as they had done over the mother. "She's going the same way," they said, whispering together, "and God help the old man then!" Going the same way, was she? Before the first winter snow had settled on the mother's grave, she was gone. And Caleb? Well, he had his dog left him, and his old clothes, and his sunshiny wall, and what would you more? Poor people can't have everything they want, you know, in this life.

When little Mattie lay stretched white and cold on the mattress on the floor (the bedstead had long since disappeared) on which her mother had died, the poor people came in and did the best they could for her—poor people are not always thrashing horses and kicking dogs to death, as some think; they sometimes do little kindnesses one for the other, and show a refinement which people in higher ranks occasionally forget. So one brought a clean white sheet and wrapt the little girl in it, another combed out her long fair hair, and a third (a flower-girl) put a spray of fern and geranium into her small thin hand.

“She’s looking *that* lovely, Caleb, she is,” said a brown old woman of sixty with a handkerchief tied over her head.

“Lord, for this once!” pleaded Caleb, lifting his hands high above his head. “For one moment only let my eyes be opened, that they may see the face I have loved and never known.” The poor people stood back, as they heard his prayer, with their breath drawn in. Almost they expected a miracle to be performed—had they not heard of such things in the churches?—and for a moment the film to be lifted from Caleb’s eyes, that they might rest on the face he had loved so well before the cold earth shut it in for evermore.

All in vain. No answering Ephphatha was breathed down from the silent everlasting heavens. Caleb’s hands fell down helplessly to his side, and Jack crept from out of a corner and licked them, and then the parish people sent their undertakers to carry Mattie away to the same big cemetery where her mother was sleeping.

All gone but Jack! Well, a dog is something, after all, to have left one; and when one is old and blind and poor, one doesn’t expect a great deal in life, you know, but is just thankful for a

crust of bread to eat, some straw or old clothes to lie down on at night, and a sunshiny wall to lean against in the day-time; so the dog was altogether something extra in the way of mercies. "How he do live on is a marvel," one to another would wonder, watching the old man creeping down the stairs day after day to take his stand in the streets; and "the dog is like a child to him now," they would say, as they noted Jack sitting on his stump of a tail, waiting for a gap in the crush of carts and carriages before he would venture to lead his master across the busy high-road.

It was in those days that Jack first began to "fend for himself." As long as the two Matties lived, there was always a plate of odds and ends of some sort—scrape it together how they might—waiting for him inside the door when he came in from his morning's work; but after they were gone, things were different. It was hard work enough for Caleb to get his own daily bread and collect the eighteen pennies which paid for his miserable little cupboard (attic it was supposed to be) at the top of the house; so when he came in at four o'clock in the winter's twilight with a loaf of bread and a few pence, the cord was

unknotted from Jack's neck and the poor animal let free to forage for himself in the alleys and gutters. Jack in this way became very punctual in his habits. At four o'clock he was released from duty; it took him about an hour to find his dinner in the streets; and punctually at five he might be seen sneaking along some by-street with a bone in his mouth or the remnants of some fish, dodging skilfully between the passers-by till he reached home, where at his master's feet he would finish in calm enjoyment his hardly earned meal—to which, be it noted, Caleb never failed to add some portion of his own, however scanty it had been.

The winter that year tried Jack and Caleb sorely. In the summer things had been a little better with them; people had a little more money to spend, and a few more halfpence would find their way into Caleb's hat, and Jack also would sometimes get a pat on the head and a biscuit or two thrown to him; but in the winter things began to go very hardly with them. Not that the people of the house were ever unkind to them. Poor souls! they were kind enough, as far as they had wherewithal to be kind; and one who remembered the old man's wife would come in

and clean up his room for him; and another, who remembered the blue-eyed Mattie, would patch up his old clothes for him; and all would give a kind word or a pat to the faithful Jack, now the old man's sole companion and protector. More than this they couldn't do. You see, when people have hard work to keep their own and their children's bodies and souls together, they can't be expected to go about distributing loaves of bread, or to have many remnants of meals to put down in their gutters to feed stray dogs and cats.

When the long frost set in in January, many and many a night did Jack and Caleb go dinnerless and supperless to bed. "Times are a little hard just now, but we'll see them out together, eh, old friend?" Caleb would say when Jack came to lick his hand by way of good-night, and to testify his opinion that, whatever happened, his master was in no sense to blame. Then they would turn in together, Caleb on his straw (the mattress had gone the way of his bedstead now), with his head on an old box for a pillow, and the faithful Jack huddled up on his feet.

Would the frost never come to an end? It was all very well for ladies wrapped in their warm sealskins and velvets to say what a healthy winter

it was, and for young people with rosy cheeks, as they looked out their skates, and pulled on their thick gauntlets, to descant on the glories of a "fine frost;" Caleb and Jack, taking their stand against the wall—sunshiny, alas! no longer—would have told a different story. Ah, surely never did east wind sweep down so ruthlessly before, never before did snowstorm last so long, never before were streets so forlorn and empty of passers-by. Caleb and Jack went home one terrible day at least one hour earlier than usual—it was useless waiting there any longer for alms—Caleb with one halfpenny in his hat, and that the gift of a poor frozen-out crossing-sweeper who rightly judged the old man to be worse off than himself.

Part of a loaf was all Caleb's food that day. "Eh, old doggie, thou shalt have thy bite of it," he said, feeding Jack with crumbs in the hollow of his hand, "for it's little enough thou'lt find for thyself in the gutters." Little enough, indeed, anywhere, save snow and ice, and Jack may hunt high and Jack may hunt low, and thrust his patient old nose into all sorts of odd corners that seem to have a faint scent of red herring or haddock, but there's little enough of supper he'll get to-night.

What was it made him so late on this particular windy, frosty, snowy afternoon? Had he lost himself in a snow-drift? thought Caleb, setting open wide his door, and listening in vain for the patter and scramble of the four little feet up the carpetless stairs. Six, seven, eight o'clock came and went, and still no sign of Jack; and Caleb crept to bed at last, shivering and forlorn, and with a sense of utter desolation and loneliness at his heart which he had never known before.

Frost, snow, sleet, east wind, went on through the night, and began again with the dawn. "Nay, but you're not going out, friend?" said a kindly old body, meeting Caleb on the stairs as the old man wearily and slowly was feeling his way down; "there'll not be a soul in the streets with a penny to spare; you'll not get your bread that way to-day."

"It's my Jack I'm going to look for to-day," said the old man, "not my bread; it may be he lost his way in the snow last night, and he's waiting for me now in the old place by the wall. Give me a hand, neighbour, and help me along a bit, will ye?" So the woman helped him along to the wall, through the biting wind and snow, but no sign of Jack when they got there.

“We’ll try the baker’s shop,” said Caleb, thinking of their old haunts, and whether it were possible that the baker’s wife, who sometimes threw Jack a broken biscuit, had taken him in out of pity for the night.

And while they were in the shop asking after the dog, there came in two children who had a strange story to tell, a story which froze Caleb’s



Listening in vain for the patter and scramble of the four little feet up the carpetless stairs.

blood in his veins as he stood and listened. They had seen a dog, a dog for all the world as like Jack as could be, being led along the day before by two men who came out of a public-house, and who talked and laughed loudly as they went along. Said one, "It doesn't do to be too tender-hearted in these hard times; human flesh and blood reckons before dog's flesh and blood any day in the week." Said the other, "And the doctor will give us a good 'arf-crown for him safe enough, and ask no questions into the bargain."

Caleb trembled from head to foot. "Take me to his house," he said in a voice that startled the children, for it vibrated and twanged like any old harpsichord with all the music gone out of it.

At the doctor's door the two children left him standing on the door-step, they themselves running away and peeping at him round the corner of the street. A man-servant answered Caleb's ring. "My dog!" said the old blind man in the same harsh trembling voice, "what have you done with him? he's white-haired like me, and thin like me; you can count every rib in his body."

Ugh! how cold it was! the east wind and sleet blew in the servant's face, and how could he be

expected to stand there talking with an old blind man on the doorstep? He half shut the door. "Your dog, old man!" he said, "we know nothing about dogs here." He would have shut the door in Caleb's face, but the old man was too quick for him, and had put his stick across the threshold. "My dog!" he repeated, louder and louder; "white-haired, thin like me; you could count every rib he had!"

A gentleman was coming down-stairs at this moment. He was dressed in the glossiest of black with the whitest of ties. He had a gleaming smile, a thick square jaw, and eyes that changed as you looked at them. "What is it?" he said tranquilly, coming towards the door. "Does the man want money?—I do not like a disturbance on my door-step. A dog, did you say—white-haired—thin! Oh yes, I had him with two collies yesterday afternoon; the brute! he wasn't worth the money I paid for him; he howled so, we had to cut his windpipe before we could do anything with him. I wouldn't have had him if I could have got a third collie: they are so much more quiet and patient. Villain! did you say, old man? No, I'm a physiologist—you shouldn't be abusive; the law protects me, and we must

have subjects. There, that'll do," and he waved his hand gracefully; "go away now. Wants his body!" This to the man-servant:—"Oh, by all means, Joseph, give him what's left of him—it's in the back yard." And the physiologist, member of at least one-half the scientific societies of Europe, and with a high repute throughout the British Isles for his learning and humanity, went calmly into his study to finish writing down the results of his experiments over-night on the two collies and poor white-haired Jack.

Caleb took the mangled body of his old friend reverently into his arms, he passed his hand tenderly over the strained eyeballs, the blood-stained throat, the severed ribs. "My God," he said, standing there in the snow and east wind outside the closed door, "I can thank Thee now that I have no sight wherewith to see the wickedness these Thy creatures have wrought."

The children came from round the corner and led him home again, Caleb still tenderly carrying Jack with his thin ragged handkerchief spread over the poor torn body.

Hours after, the neighbours wondered why there was not a sound of movement in the old man's room, and went up, fearing he might be

ill, and there was he standing erect and rigid with Jack's body in his arms, and the words of thanksgiving still on his lips, "God, I thank

Thee that I have no eyes to see this devils' work!"

Yes, he lives on, this old man, companionless and alone; the neighbours do what they

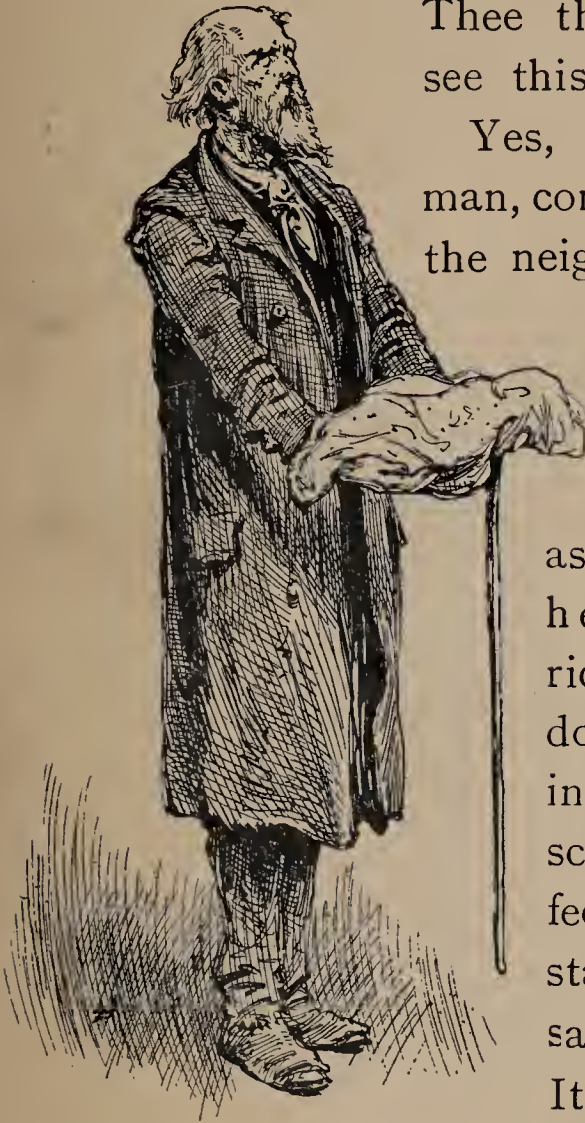
can for him, and he rarely wants a loaf of bread or a cup of tea now. Every evening,

as the clock strikes five, he gets up from his rickety chair, opens his door, and stands listening for the patter and scramble of old Jack's feet up the carpetless stairs. Silly! do you

say?—he has gone silly! It may be so; I do

not know. Often we are wisest when most we

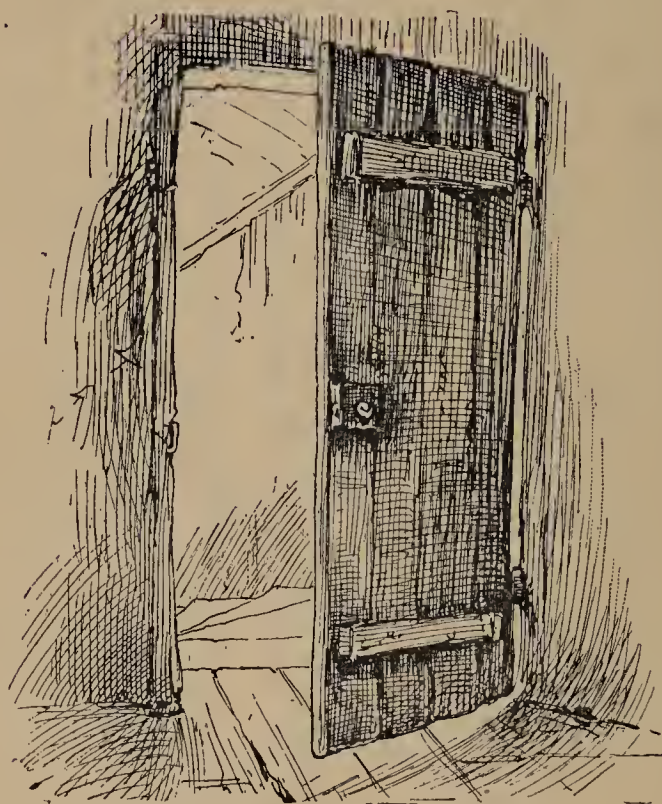
are called foolish, and foolish when we are thought to be most wise. I only know that



"God, I thank Thee that I have no eyes to see this devils' work!"

old Caleb stands daily, blind and silent, at his open door, listening for the footsteps that will never return.

Some day One will enter in with a message for him—the Angel of Death.



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